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ABSTRACT

An antibias curriculum seeks to nurture children's potential by addressing issues of diversity and equity in the classroom. Goals of antibias curricula are to foster children's self-identity, interaction with people from diverse backgrounds, critical thinking about bias, and ability to stand up for themselves in the face of bias. The first phase in the implementation of an antibias curriculum involves creating an appropriate climate in the classroom. In this phase, teachers raise their awareness of antibias issues that relate to themselves, learn what ideas their students have about diversity, evaluate the classroom environment for the messages it contains about diversity, and identify parents who would be willing to participate in changing the classroom environment. The second and third phases involve teachers' nonsystematic and then systematic incorporation into classroom instruction of activities that teach antibias attitudes. During these phases, parent participation should be increased. The fourth phase consists of an ongoing integration of an antibias perspective as a filter through which the teacher plans, implements, and evaluates all learning materials, class activities, and teacher interactions with children, parents, and staff. (BC)

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ERIC Digest

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Implementing an Anti-Bias Curriculum in Early Childhood Classrooms

Julie Bisson Hohensee and Louise Derman-Sparks

Children are aware of differences in color, language, gender, and physical ability at a very young age. Numerous research studies about the process of identity and attitude development conclude that children learn by observing the differences and similarities among people and by absorbing the spoken and unspoken messages about those differences. The biases and negative stereotypes about various aspects of human diversity prevalent in our society undercut all children's healthy development and ill-equip them to interact effectively with many people in the world. Consequently, anti-bias curriculum seeks to nurture the development of every child's fullest potential by actively addressing issues of diversity and equity in the classroom.

Specific curriculum goals of anti-bias curriculum are to foster each child's:

- construction of a knowledgeable, confident self-identity;
- comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds;
- critical thinking about bias;
- ability to stand up for herself or himself, and for others, in the face of bias.

A belief in the value of human diversity and the fair treatment of all people is a prerequisite for doing anti-bias work. When teachers become committed to learning how to implement anti-bias curricula in their settings, they seem to go through four identifiable phases.

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Creating the Climate

Phase one involves teachers raising their own awareness of anti-bias issues related to themselves, their program, and the children in their care. A support group is essential for this process. Cooperative learning is the best method for developing anti-bias awareness and knowledge. Everyone needs the diverse perspectives and honest feedback of peers to develop new insights and teaching practices. Support group members may be other staff, parents, or early childhood teachers who want anti-bias curriculum for their children. Groups should meet regularly—at least once a month. Group members can build self-awareness by asking introspective questions and talking over responses with others committed to doing anti-bias work. Useful questions are, How did I become aware of the various aspects of my identity? What differences among people make me feel uncomfortable? When have I experienced or witnessed bias in my life and how did I respond? Group members should work toward facing biases and discomforts and eliminating their influence on teaching.

Another step in this process involves finding out what ideas children have about diversity by observing and interviewing them. Teachers can ask questions such as, What do you know about Indians? What makes you a girl or boy? What kind of work could this person do? (while showing a picture of a person in a wheelchair). Teachers can evaluate children's answers for signs of misinformation and discomfort. Responses alert the teacher to necessary directions for curriculum activities. The reading of research studies about children's development of identity and attitudes will also fill out the framework for curriculum decisions.

Evaluating the classroom environment and beginning to make necessary changes is the third component of phase one. Teachers must take a critical look at *all* the materials in the classroom environment, asking themselves what messages about diversity the children get from the materials. Do children see abundant images of people that reflect diverse abilities and current racial, ethnic, gender, and economic diversity? Do the images include depictions of important individuals that participated in struggles for justice? (See the first chapter in Derman-Sparks, 1992 for ideas.) After this evaluation, teachers can make a plan for buying and making needed new materials and eliminating inappropriate stereotypical materials.

Finally, teachers can begin to identify parents who might be interested in anti-bias curriculum, and invite them to participate in the process of changing the environment.

Nonsystematic Implementation

In the second phase, a teacher begins to explore the process of doing anti-bias activities. "Teachable moments" that arise from observing and interviewing children are one starting point. For example, the arrival of a child who uses leg braces may stimulate questions or discomfort from some children. The teacher can get ideas about what to do by reading relevant curriculum materials, talking with other

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teachers about how they might handle the situation, and taking the plunge of initiating some activities. A teacher who observes children insisting on role-playing only stereotypical gender roles in dramatic play could initiate activities that expand children's awareness of gender roles. These might involve visiting workplaces, inviting visitors to the classroom, or reading a book about girls and boys doing nontraditional as well as traditional activities.

Teacher-initiated activities are another starting place for exploring anti-bias curriculum. For example, an activity about skin color, such as mixing paints to find children's individual skin colors, can be included in the frequently used curriculum theme of "I'm Me; I'm Special!"

In this second phase, it is crucial to begin involving all parents. Parents should be informed about how and why anti-bias activities are now part of the children's curriculum and invited to participate. Newsletters, parent meetings, and individual conferences are all useful. Plan a parent education session about how children develop identity and attitudes.

As teachers explore the process of doing anti-bias work with children and parents, they also continue their own personal growth on anti-bias issues. Once implementation is underway, ongoing support groups remain essential to share the successes, evaluate the mistakes, provide encouragement, and plan what to do next.

Systematic Implementation

After spending some time trying out anti-bias activities, a teacher is ready to do more systematic, long-term planning. The teacher can step back, take a look at what has happened, and ask, What issues have surfaced? What has been accomplished? What areas need further work?

Teachers can consider ways to regularly integrate all anti-bias goals and issues into all aspects of the ongoing curriculum. Children's backgrounds and developmental needs should be taken into account in the planning of culturally inclusive curricula. Parents should regularly be involved in the planning and implementation of activities, and in group discussions about specific anti-bias issues. Teachers should continue to work on personal issues that arise in the course of teaching children and parents and continue to meet with a support group.

Ongoing Integration

In this phase, the anti-bias perspective becomes a filter through which the teacher plans, implements, and evaluates all materials, activities, and interactions with children, parents, and staff. Learning about diversity and equity permeates all activities. As children engage in activities, they respond with comments and questions that become further "teachable moments." Teachers then plan more activities in response, which in turn lead to more teachable moments from the children, and the cycle continues as a part of daily classroom life. The teacher adapts curriculum to the changing needs of children; continues to consult with parents about their current issues; and continues to deepen his or her own awareness of anti-bias issues. Doing anti-bias curriculum is now a way of life.

This ERIC/EECE Digest is based on *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools For Empowering Young Children*, by Louise Derman-Sparks (1989). Washington, DC: NAEYC.

For More Information

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